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SUBJECT: TONGA PM SAYS APPROACH TO FIJI NEEDS REVISION

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11. (SBU) Summary. On May 18, Tongan Prime Minister Dr. Feleti Seveli gave a public address in Wellington where he stated that critics need not worry about political reform in his country as it was continuing apace and is fully supported by the Tongan King. On Fiji, Dr. Seveli offered a nuanced position. He stated that expulsion from the PIF would not help the Fijian nation and isolation would ultimately be harmful to its people. He advocated a softer approach to solving the Fijian problem. Dr. Seveli spoke warmly of the historical relationship with the U.S. and noted that it formed the incentive for a Tongan contribution to military work in Iraq. End Summary.

Tongan PM in NZ Speaks about Political Reform, Fiji

12. (SBU) On May 18, New Zealand's Pacific Cooperation Foundation and Victoria University hosted Tongan Prime Minister Dr. Feleti Seveli, who spoke before a large audience of foreign diplomats, GNZ officials, students and members of the Tongan expatriate community. Dr. Seveli divided his comments into three parts: Tonga's political reform program; Tonga's position on the interim Fijian Government, and, to a lesser extent, Tonga's historical foreign relations.

Claims Political Reform Alive and Well in Tonga

13. (SBU) Political reform in Tonga has been, according to Dr. Seveli, an ongoing process since the enactment of the country's constitution in 1875. He reminded the audience that Tonga's lengthy constitutional history established the balance between its executive branch, legislature, and judiciary with the executive power of the constitutional monarchy exercised through the Cabinet. He stated that political reforms continue in earnest even though Tonga already has many constitutionally-mandated political freedoms. He cited as examples the freedom of speech, freedom of the press and the right to a fair trial.

14. (SBU) Dr. Seveli praised King George Tupou V of Tonga as the principle driver behind political reform. He strongly refuted any suggestion that the Tongan royal family had "a stranglehold" on Tonga and highlighted the ascension to positions of influence of commoners, like himself, to support his claim. Dr. Seveli spoke against criticism of Tonga's political and constitutional arrangements as "unfair" and "misinformed." Anxiety about his government's commitment to reform was deemed "unfounded" and such critics as "unable to accept the truth and face reality."

Fiji: Wrong to Isolate, Need to Rethink Strategy

15. (SBU) Dr. Seveli began his comments on Fiji by underscoring Tonga's traditional kinship with Fiji. He reminded the audience that it was the decision of the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) to expel the Fijian Interim government and not the nation of Fiji. Throughout his comments, Dr. Seveli repeated this distinction to demonstrate Tonga's nuanced position towards Fiji. Although, he declared, Tonga does not condone the removal of a legitimately-elected government by Commodore Frank Bainimarama, undermining the interim government will ultimately hurt the Fijian people and will not improve the present situation. "What is done is done," Dr. Seveli declared, and "what now must be strived for is the best possible outcome." He went on to say that the "future of the Fijian nation will not be helped by its expulsion from the PIF." Although he stopped short of overtly criticizing the PIF's decision, Dr. Seveli posited that a more prudent course of action should be to re-consider the expulsion and to "let Fiji work out its own problems." Though he did not outwardly caution against imposing economic sanctions on Fiji, Dr. Seveli noted that Fiji cannot be allowed to become an "economic basket case" given its importance as a regional hub of commerce.

Backhanded Slap at NZ and Australia?

16. (SBU) Dr. Seveli stated that his talks with the NZ Government about Fiji left him "encouraged." Nevertheless, he suggested that it may be best for others to stand back and be more patient with Fiji. He said that Tonga and other regional governments can act as facilitators but ultimately it is for Fijian themselves to decide their own destiny. He encouraged regional governments to be more enlightened in their thinking towards Commodore Bainimarama. Director of the Centre of Strategic Studies Peter Cozens later opined that Seveli's comments implied criticism of the NZ and Australian approach to Fiji.

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Historical Bilateral Relations: Praise for US and NZ

17. (SBU) In charting Tonga's historical foreign relations, Dr. Seveli emphasized Tonga's strong relationship with the U.S. He explained there were two primary reasons why Tonga supported and participated in military work in Iraq. The first was in recognition of the historical U.S.-Tonga relationship and the fact that many ethnic Tongans now call the U.S. home. Second, Tongans feel a measure of gratitude to the U.S. military for its role in Tonga during World War Two. On New Zealand, Dr. Seveli spoke warmly of his schooling days in New Zealand and noted that connections formed during this time helped his business and political career. He praised New Zealanders for having a sound understanding of Tonga and having never tried to dictate terms to his country.

Comment

18. (SBU) Throughout his address, Dr. Seveli spoke in a placid and quiet manner. Nevertheless, the strength of his reaction to criticism of political reform in Tonga and how best to deal with Fiji were pointed and not lost on onlookers. The address was in keeping with previous public statements by Dr. Seveli that there should a softer line towards Fiji, which has allowed for quieter but more frank exchanges with the interim government. Expatriate Tongans in attendance appeared to be more focused, however, on political reform in their homeland. They appeared to be supportive of Dr. Seveli as evidenced by statements of praise and encouragement made at the conclusion of his formal remarks. End Comment.

Keegan